



December 1, 2020

House Committee on Judiciary and Civil Jurisprudence

Rep. Jeff Leach, Chair

Cassidy Zgabay, Committee Clerk

submitted via email: cassidy.zgabay_hc@house.texas.gov

Dear Chair Leach, Vice Chair Neave and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to write to you today in order to submit my input on the House Committee on Judiciary and Civil Jurisprudence's Interim Charge No. 2:

Interim Charge 2: Study opportunities to modernize and improve local and statewide data collection throughout the criminal justice system in Texas, including improving the collection and reporting of court records, to promote transparency and ensure uniform data collection processes.

I am the executive director of the Texas Justice Initiative, a nonprofit organization founded in 2016 in order to create a portal for data on the Texas criminal justice system. Since we launched our website, TJI has provided real-time data on officer-involved shootings and deaths in custody in Texas in formats people can understand. Over the years, we have added data visualization tools and data sets like a dashboard detailing the deaths of people who were jailed awaiting trial, deaths of incarcerated individuals due to COVID-19, law enforcement COVID-19 deaths and serious incidents in Texas county jails.

TJI deals in data that is publicly available – accessible via open records requests – but is otherwise not made public in a useable way. As you all are aware, many state laws are passed with the caveat that data be collected in order to analyze the impact of such laws – yet, all too often, that data sits in filing cabinets or on hard drives for years without getting a passing glance. TJI pays attention to this fine print

and collects this underutilized data from the government, then cleans it and processes it to be displayed on our website, in filterable and understandable visualizations, to the public for free.

Currently, many types of criminal justice data are maintained in PDFs. Even data that is collected electronically – such as monthly jail population reports, thanks to last session’s HB 3440 – is not made *available* to the public in an electronic format like a spreadsheet. TJI undertakes the process of freeing data from PDFs and processing it for easier use, but would like to encourage that any future data collection requirements are accompanied with a requirement to make the data available in a user-friendly format.

There are many different agencies under the umbrella of criminal justice that collect various sets of data, and TJI exists to collect all of these sets in one place to give a more comprehensive picture of the criminal justice system. However, it would be helpful if agencies that are required to collect data are also required to post the data in a particular place on their own websites so that the public does not have to go through the process of filing open records requests.

Finally, while TJI supports enhancing the collection of criminal justice data in Texas, we would caution that the inconsistent collection of data is not very helpful in conducting any analysis that could lead to identifying best practices, anomalies and aspects of our system that need improvement. Any new requirements should be uniformly required in all applicable agencies, and the same data should be collected in the same fashion across the board.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide my feedback to the Texas Legislature, and please reach out if I can be of further assistance.

Best,

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Executive Director

Texas Justice Initiative

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